

**Opening Statement of
The Honorable Tom Feeney, Ranking Republican
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics
Hearing on: “Near Earth Objects (NEOs) – Status of the Survey Program and
Review of NASA’s Report to Congress”
November 8, 2007**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this morning’s hearing. And I want to echo Mr. Udall’s comments, acknowledging that our originally scheduled hearing was postponed on very short notice. I greatly appreciate that all of our scheduled witnesses were able to accommodate the date change, and I hope notice got out quickly enough to save you from unnecessary travel.

NASA’s Near Earth Object (NEO) program, though very modest in scale compared to many of the agency’s multi-billion dollar endeavors, is vitally important, and NASA has been doing an exemplary job standing-up an office and managing the nation’s – and world’s – only survey for potentially hazardous Earth-crossing asteroids and comets. I find it distressing that other nations haven’t, to date, taken a more active role.

NASA began the NEO survey, called the “Spaceguard” program, in 1998 with the goal of detecting and cataloguing 90 percent of all potentially hazardous asteroids and comets larger than 1 kilometer in diameter within a decade, and it appears to be on track to meet that target.

Subsequently, in 2003 a NASA-chartered team of scientists recommended that the survey seek all NEOs of 140 meters in diameter or larger, reasoning that the smallest of these could still inflict large regional impacts if they struck Earth. Their recommendations were made part of the 2005 NASA authorization legislation, directing NASA to “plan, develop and implement a Near-Earth Object Survey program to detect, track, catalogue, and characterize...near-Earth objects equal to or greater than 140 meters in diameter...,” with the goal of 90 percent completion within 15 years. This change in mission is no small matter, as the universe of potentially hazardous objects (PHOs) to be detected and catalogued increased by a factor of twenty (from 1000 to 20,000). The bill also required NASA to complete an analysis of alternatives to meet this ambitious goal and to report back with a recommended option.

NASA provided such a report earlier this year but did not indicate a preferred choice, instead urging the current “Spaceguard” program be allowed to continue its survey for 1 kilometer and larger near-Earth objects, and to allow the agency to take advantage of opportunities using potential dual-use telescopes and spacecraft to achieve the goals outlined in the 2005 authorization, although the 15 year timeline may not be met in all cases. NASA’s rationale is purely budget driven, arguing that current resources are too constrained. While disappointed, I certainly can’t disagree with their reasoning.

At this morning's hearing, it is my hope that we get a clearer understanding of NASA's plans to proceed with utilizing dual-use telescopes and spacecraft, their potential costs and schedules, and other facilities that may be utilized, including the Arecibo Observatory. I hope to hear of concrete steps being taken by NASA to develop cooperative relationships necessary to ensure the requirements laid out in the 2005 NASA authorization are met.

We'll also hear about the future of the Arecibo Radio Observatory in Puerto Rico, the largest and most powerful such facility in the world. Arecibo is operated by Cornell University under a contract with the National Science Foundation (NSF). It appears very likely NSF will significantly reduce its financial support such that Arecibo will have to shut down its radar facility. This, I think, would be a mistake. Arecibo has the capability of making very precise orbital calculations in a short amount of time, a critical feature that optical telescopes cannot match. And the sum of money at stake is on the order of about \$2 million a year, an investment that I think is well worth the return. While NSF may be outside the purview of this Subcommittee, the ramifications of Arecibo's loss to the NEO program begs the discussion.

I want to welcome my friend, Rep. Fortuño, to today's hearing. I also want again to say thanks to our excellent panel of expert witnesses for taking time from their busy schedules to be here.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.